

Rethinking the Rethinking

The Problem of Generality in Qualitative Media Audience Research

GÖRAN ERIKSSON

Abstract

During the last few decades, the possibilities and limitations of qualitative media audience research have regularly been discussed in media and communication research. Quantitatively oriented researchers have claimed that qualitatively oriented research is incapable of producing general knowledge. From a ‘radical ethnographic’ point of view it has been stated that such knowledge is more or less useless, while other qualitatively oriented researchers have approached the question of generality in a more balanced way, and argued for the necessity to interpret specific events within a framework of more general theories. But these solutions are not satisfactory. The aim of this article is to suggest an alternative conceptualisation of generality. From the meta-theoretical viewpoint of critical realism, this article states that generalisations have to take into consideration the domain of the deep structures of reality. Qualitative media audience research should aim at producing general knowledge about the *constituent properties* or *transfactual conditions* of the process of media consumption.

Key Words: generality, critical realism, media audience research

Introduction

During the last few decades, the possibilities and limitations of qualitative media audience research have been discussed regularly in media and communication research. At the core of these discussions is the potentiality – or rather lack of potentiality – of qualitative media audience research to produce general (and valid) knowledge. For example, researchers working within the quantitatively oriented Uses & Gratifications approach have claimed that as long as the qualitative side does not follow more conventional procedures (such as using techniques for random sampling) it is incapable of producing general knowledge (Rosengren 1993).

Qualitatively oriented researchers have approached this critique in different ways. One (extreme) way to answer is to merely reject claims of generality. From the standpoint of radical ethnography, media consumption is “always specific in its meanings and impacts” (Ang, 1991:160) and can not be described in general terms. Other qualitatively oriented researchers have approached the question of generality more cautiously. They have seen the empirical generalisations as a goal for qualitative research as problematic, but at the same time have refused to accept the radical ethnographic standpoint (Höijer 1990; Jensen

1995; Schröder 1999; Drotner 2000; Halkier 2003). These researchers have seen the necessity to interpret specific events or situations within a framework of more general categories and theories. With these contributions to the ongoing debate, they have provided important insights on qualitative media audience research and its future.

With critical realism as a point of departure, the aim of this article is to suggest an alternative conceptualisation of generality.¹ From the viewpoint of critical realism, the solutions from the qualitatively oriented researchers are not satisfactory. The different forms of generalisations that qualitatively oriented researchers are aiming at tend to be coloured by an empiricist conceptualisation of generality as representativeness, or to be too close to data. The central argument of this article is that scientific generalisations must take into consideration the domain of the deep structures of reality. Research should not be limited to observable empirical facts (Sayer 1992; Collier 1994; Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson 2002). Instead, it should aim at identifying and gaining knowledge of the structures and the constituent mechanisms of the object under study. A vital argument is that qualitative media audience research has an inherent capacity to gain such knowledge.

This article is delimited to discussing media audience research. The problem of generality certainly does not only concern this area of research. It could be discussed in other areas of investigation within the field of media and communication studies, or in other disciplines as well. One important reason for this delimitation is that the debate over the problem of generality has been rather lively for some time now, but the discussion seems to have reached a dead end.

The article is outlined in three sections. In the first section the epistemological gap that has characterised discussions about generality and qualitative media audience research in the past is illustrated briefly. Then, two different and rather recent examples of how qualitatively oriented researchers have tried to bridge this gap and find a way to produce more general knowledge are presented. In the next section an alternative conceptualisation of generality, based on critical realism, is put forward and the two examples are evaluated. The article ends with a “research map for qualitatively oriented media audience research” and makes some suggestions about which kind of structures or constituent mechanisms qualitative media audience research could focus on.

Generality and Qualitative Media Audience Research

An essential point in this article is that *qualitative media audience research should aim at producing general knowledge*. This aim has been questioned from at least two different angles: by researchers within the quantitatively oriented Uses and Gratifications approach (U&G) and from the viewpoint of radical ethnography (sometimes described as ethnographic fundamentalism). A prominent representative of the former position is Karl-Erik Rosengren. In the *Ferment in the field* issue of *Journal of Communication* he argued for cross-fertilization between his own perspective and qualitative media audience research (Rosengren 1983). According to Rosengren, the antagonism between the two camps was, to a large extent, “pseudo conflicts”. Quite contrary to what the two sides claimed, he thought it was possible to find (methodological) solutions to the problems within the field. This optimism was based on a strong belief in his own functionalist approach, as well as a belief in advanced multivariate analyses. He also saw the growing interest in conducting empirical studies from the qualitative side as a good sign.

The solution Rosengren (1983; see also 1993) proposed was simply that the questions asked by the qualitative research could be reformulated as hypotheses that could in turn be tested on random samples. As long as the sample is representative it is possible – using advanced statistical analysis – to draw conclusions about the population in question. In contrast to the results produced in qualitative media audience research, it is possible to control and replicate (and to falsify) these results. When Rosengren discusses generality, it is as a form of empirical extrapolations. The researcher works inductively, going from knowledge about a limited number of units to draw conclusions about a well-defined population. If a researcher does not follow these conventional procedures (which qualitatively oriented researchers do not), he or she is incapable of producing general knowledge.

Radical ethnographers such as Ien Ang reject the ambition to produce general knowledge. What is suggested is a “methodological situationalism” (Ang (1991:162). According to Ang (1991:158) the “quantified generalisations (‘many’, ‘minimal’, ‘major’)” that often are often the result produced by researchers on the quantitative side could “at best be called disappointingly trivial”. An understanding of the media audience could never be reduced to a number of background variables. Watching television must be seen as a “complex and dynamic cultural process, fully integrated in the messiness of everyday life, and always specific in its meanings and impacts” (Ang, 1991:160). Ang refuses to see the viewers as a “taxonomic collective”, to understand the audience as members with “neatly and describable and categorizable attributes”. She states that “emphasis on the situational embeddedness of audience practices and experiences inevitably undercuts the search for generalizations that is often seen as the ultimate goal of scientific knowledge”. Instead this perspective accentuates that “the dangers of easy categorization and generalisation /.../ are greater than the benefits of a consistent particularism” (Ang and Hermes, 1996:342). Empirical extrapolations – following an inductive logic – are not satisfactory. The forms of knowledge produced in such procedures tend to lose sight of what is actually going on in the process of media consumption in everyday life.

The radical ethnographic view on the problem of generality has been criticised by other qualitatively oriented researchers. These researchers have argued that it is necessary for qualitative media audience research to work with more general concepts and theories (Höijer 1990; Schröder 1999; Drotner 2000; see also Halkier 2003). Here, I will give two examples of such discussions, from (1) Kirsten Drotner (2000) and (2) Kim Schröder (1999), paying more attention to Schröder’s suggestion. The reason for this is that his attempt is more developed than others in methodological terms. He explicitly claims to bring together “the best of both worlds” in what he calls *the integrated approach*.

(1) The first example is from the anthology *Consuming Audiences?* (2000) in which Drotner discusses the relationship between reception analysis and media ethnography. She argues that the latter should be seen as “an epistemological alternative” to the former, and not “as its continuation or supplement” (Drotner 2000:166). The point of departure for this article is the debate over qualitative media audience research during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the researcher’s own extensive experiences of conducting both media ethnography and reception analysis. She exemplifies her discussion with an ethnographic study of youths (14-17 years old) who were making videos as a leisure time activity. The focus in the study was on “how visual genres” were “negotiated and made meaningful in gender terms”.

Drotner criticises the stance taken by Ang. The question for her “is not whether or not we may generalize media-ethnographic findings but how we do so” (Drotner 2000:175). The methodology that Drotner then suggests is an approach based on Grounded Theory. This methodological perspective was once developed as a critique against hypothesis-testing approaches (such as U & G research). Instead, this position claims that the researcher should take his or her point of departure in very careful studies of empirical phenomena (Glaser & Strauss 1967; see also Strauss & Corbin 1998). In using a number of methodological guidelines and procedures, the aim is to generate theories or concepts that are well-grounded in data. Such theories/concepts should be grounded in people’s understanding of everyday life.

A fundamental distinction in Grounded Theory is the one between formal and substantive categories or theories. A substantial theory covers a specific area of inquiry, and in this case Drotner developed a distinction between “romantic girls” and “action-oriented boys”. A formal theory is more abstract and is applicable to a broader range of subjects. Later in the analytical process of her project, Drotner was able to see these categories as part of a formal category of gender relations. The research process led to an understanding of the actions occurring in the group as “/.../a process of mutual articulation and negotiation of gendered otherness /.../” (Drotner 2000:176). It was thus possible for Drotner to interpret the more specific and concrete situations within a framework of more general theory. When Drotner discusses this way of theorising it is labelled “incomplete generalisations”: “Because we cannot make complete generalizations we do not have to abandon categorization beyond the particular case – incomplete generalization is a useful, and indeed necessary, part of interpretation” (Drotner 2000:176).

(2) The second example is from the anthology *Rethinking the Media Audience* (1999). Schröder offers a way to integrate qualitative studies in a methodology through which he thinks it is possible to produce general knowledge. The main point he makes is that both the U & G approach and the ethnographic research to the media audience have their deficiencies and merits, but “it is by synthesizing these approaches into one research design that we may be able to develop a method to overcome the deficiencies and preserve the merits” (Schröder 1999:38). In brief, this means an approach that tries to combine “the ‘thick description’ of the contextualized data of ethnographic inquiry with the reliability and generalizability of social science measurement”.

The problem he sees with qualitative research is that it works with a restricted, often very small, number of cases. The samples are too limited to be representative of whole populations. From the non-random samples (such as snowball sampling or typical-case sampling) it is not possible to draw more general conclusions. Schröder (p.48) emphasizes that in spite of this, qualitative research has contributed important and valuable insights about media audiences and the process of media consumption: “/.../ the ethnographic tradition has produced ground-breaking research with far-reaching academic, cultural and educational implications”. But now the qualitatively oriented research has reached a stage at which it must deal with its limitations to manage “to enable us to deliver research with even greater explanatory potential”.

The integrated approach is a methodology in which different methods are used to strengthen each other, and to contribute to the explanatory power. In brief, this means the process of data gathering and analysis follows the ethnographic tradition, but this should then be combined with the quantitatively oriented research procedures for reliability and generalisability. Generality is then described as “representativeness” and

deals with “the necessarily small sample studied may be said to represent the larger population for which the researcher wishes the study to have explanatory power” (Schröder 1999:53).

Schröder does not align himself totally with this form of empirical generalisation. Influenced by Roe (1996), he argues that qualitative research should aim at producing *maps*: Rejecting the stance taken by radical ethnography, Schröder claims that the qualitatively oriented media audience research must admit “that it is necessary to draw maps at all”. One example of maps is the positions – *dominant, negotiated* and *oppositional* – that Morley (1980) used in the Nationwide Audience study to interpret and present the data. Schröder also exemplifies this with his own reception study on “non-product, ‘ethical’ corporate advertisements” (see Schröder 1997). In this study he used the concepts (or maps) *sympathetic, agnostic* and *cynical* in order to understand the readings made by British and Danish readers. He is aware that details will be lost in such maps, but underlines that they must be presented with careful descriptions of what, for example, characterises a sympathetic reading and a cynical reading. The integrated approach is exemplified in a case study called *The Danes and the Media: Daily Life and Democracy*. The aim of the study was to investigate people’s media use in relationship to their participation – if they were active or passive – in the democratic process. The results are presented in a four-fold typology (see figure 1) involving the following variables (and values): “Democratic participation as ‘organizer’ (yes or no)” and “level of information-seeking through the media (high or low)”. This means that four different maps – or categories – were distinguished: “well-informed organizers” (including five groups), “well-informed non-organizers” (ten groups), “less-informed organizers” (eight groups) “less-informed non-organizers” (four groups).

Figure 1. *Democratic Participation and Information-seeking through the Media*

		Democratic participation as 'organizers'	
		Yes	No
Level of information-seeking through the media	High	A 5	B 10
	Low	C 8	D 4

Source: Schröder 1999:61.

When this investigation was reported, the different maps/categories were described thoroughly in 3-4 pages. From these results, a recommendation for a media policy was developed. What is obvious is that the positions Schröder aims at should be seen as “typical” and should be used to describe groups’ media use in relationship to their participation in the democratic process.

The researchers above take up a vital discussion regarding qualitative media audience research and its future. It is essential for qualitative media audience research to understand actions in specific situations as something that could be interpreted within a framework of more general theories and concepts; it is necessary to theorise beyond particular cases. There is some potential with these solutions, but from a critical-realistic perspective there are also some shortcomings. This critique will be developed in the next section.

Generality – An Alternative Conception

An important starting point for the perspective proposed in this article is the (early) works by the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1978; 1989). Bhaskar's reasoning is not only philosophical but is also linked to social theory and methodology. The methodological implications of critical realism have also been discussed and developed by other researchers (Sayer 1992; Layder 1993; Collier 1994; Danermark et al. 2002). The line of argument from these researchers, which also includes some critical notes on Bhaskar's work, is the base for the argumentation. Here, very briefly, some of the ideas that are of importance in discussing the realistic concept of generality will be introduced.

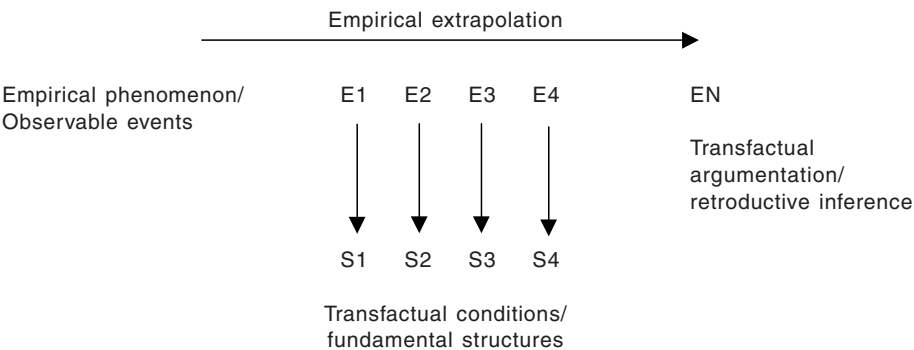
The realism defended by Bhaskar could be referred to as “depth realism” (Collier 1994).² Instead of starting with the question of how knowledge is possible, Bhaskar starts with an ontological assumption and reflects on reality and what reality must be like to make the existence of *science* possible. The answer is that a condition for the existence of science is a distinction between three domains of reality: *the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical*. The Empirical domain consists of experiences and is separated from the Actual domain, in which events occur. One point here is that all events that occur are not experienced, so what happens in the world and what is experienced are not the same thing. The domain of the Actual is in turn separated from the domain of the Real, which contains the powers – structures and mechanisms – that generate observable phenomena. This domain is not available through direct experiences, only indirectly through the events that are generated.

These thoughts are explained with reference to the nature of experimental activity. According to Bhaskar (1978), the experiment is a process in which the researcher aims at identifying how one or several mechanisms operate. It is seldom possible to identify the mechanisms the researcher is searching for by direct observation. Instead, the researcher often manipulates, tries to “enforce” reactions from, the mechanisms, and without this manipulation it is not possible to detect these mechanisms.³

Searching for the underlying mechanism could be characterised as a causal analysis. This analysis “deals with explaining why what happens actually does happen” (Danermark et al. 2002:52). The objects of science are (often) complex things, which consist of different powers and generative mechanisms. Many mechanisms could be operating at the same time. Some mechanisms could reinforce each other, and some could neutralise each other. This also implies that mechanisms exist even if their powers are not exercised. This is one reason why Bhaskar (1978:50) argues that the powers of mechanisms “must be analysed as tendencies”; an object tends – with reference to its fundamental structures – to act in a certain way. The researcher should aim at reaching “beyond the purely empirical assertion of a certain phenomenon, to a description of what it was in the object that made it possible” (Danermark et al. 2002:58).

From a critical-realistic point of view, generality refers to the transfactual conditions/fundamental structures of the phenomena. The difference between this form of generality (as transfactual conditions/fundamental structures) and empirical extrapolations (generality as representativeness) is visualised in figure 2. The latter conceptualisation deals with the question of whether a sample may be said to represent the larger population (horizontal arrow). The researcher aims at deciding how generally occurring the observable phenomena (E1, E2, E3, etc.) are, or tries to determine (causal) relationships between different phenomena, to what extent one variable affects another.

Figure 2. *Two Types of Generalisation*



Source: Danermark et al. 2002:77.

The figure illustrates that empirical extrapolation (EN) is a form of conclusion that does not leave the empirical level⁴ but instead only concerns observable phenomena. The main difference between this form of generality and the realist concept of generality is that the latter takes into consideration the deep structures of reality (S1, S2, S3, etc.). The researcher strives to identify (the vertical arrows) the transfactual conditions, the constituent properties that make an object what it is and have the powers it has. Instead of making the empirical phenomena the object of knowledge, this perspective “regards the objects of knowledge as the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena / .../” (Bhaskar 1978:25).

The thoughts outlined thus far raise the question of how it is possible to identify and gain knowledge about the fundamental structures of objects. Only a brief answer can be given here. There are, of course, great differences between the experimental activity in natural science and how media audience research could be conducted (whether or not it is qualitatively or quantitatively oriented). Conducting experiments in natural science, the researcher strives to create a “closed system”. If the researcher is successful, he or she is able to control the situation in which mechanisms operate, and by means of this control is able to identify a specific mechanism and its powers (and neutralise other mechanisms with their power). For media audience research, or social science in general, this is impossible. It works under *open social conditions*. Media consumption (or other social activities) takes place in (“the messiness of”) everyday life, and in the concrete situations of consumption there will be many mechanisms at work. Some of these mechanisms will generate events, while others will not be triggered.

For this reason, *conceptual abstraction* is vital (Sayer 1992; Danermark et al. 2002). It is through abstraction, using different modes of scientific inferences, that the researcher is able to deal with complex objects, and is able to identify fundamental structures that make things happen in the world.⁵ In everyday life the term *abstract* often refers to something vague, something that is difficult to grasp. Here, it is used in a different way: “an abstract concept, or an abstraction, isolates in thought a one-sided or partial aspect of an object. What we abstract from are the many other aspects which together constitute concrete objects such as people, economics, nations, institutions, activities and so on” (Sayer 1992:87). In scientific work we use abstractions, not to cover the complexity and variation of social life, but in order to deal with this complexity (Danermark et al. 2002). Danermark et al. conclude that “Critical realist analysis is built around this understanding of natural necessity, and our abstractions should primarily aim at determining these necessary and constitutive properties in different objects, thus determining the nature of the object” (Danermark et al. 2002:44). It is in this sense that qualitative media audience research should make general claims; to develop abstract concepts that have the capacity to identify necessary and constitutive properties of the object in question.

With this alternative and realistic conception of generality in mind, the problem with the two examples presented in section 2 above is that they tend to be caught in a conceptualisation of generality as representativity/representativeness, or to be too close to data. The former is the main problem with Schröder’s approach. The results of the study *The Danes and the Media* are presented in a four-fold typology (see figure 1). These maps/categories thoroughly describe the characteristics that households have in common. In a sense, the maps describe more general positions, but apart from the fact that these are more well-grounded in data, it is difficult to see what differentiates these maps from the kind of empirical categories that quantitatively oriented research uses. Schröder also seems to imply that these maps could be used in an extensive and quantitative study in order to draw conclusions about a population. The maps seem to be only a part of the answer.

The most vital argument for the integrated approach is that it was developed to have “greater explanatory power” than other qualitative studies. It is not clear what was explained in the four-fold typology. What made what possible? Is it the degree of information seeking that has an effect on people’s activity in the democratic process, or is it the other way around? The problem with Schröder’s approach is that it does not move away from the empirical level; it does not seek to reveal the transfactual conditions or fundamental structures of the objects of study. Schröder should have moved on from his maps and asked questions about what caused these positions. What underlying mechanisms produced them? What transfactual conditions or fundamental structures made them possible?

Drotner’s (2000) “incomplete generalisations” as a solution to the problem of generality also seem troublesome. Firstly, terming them “incomplete” seems to suggest that there are other, and complete, forms of generality, or what seems to be a more reasonable conclusion is that she sees “complete generalizations” as an ideal that is not achievable in qualitative research. What seems to be “complete generalizations” (although I am not certain here) is the (im)possibility to say something general about a population. Secondly, the concepts developed in her approach are limited to describing empirical phenomena as such; they are – from the viewpoint of critical realism – too close to the data. The substantial concepts (“romantic girls” and “action-oriented boys”) do not say

anything about what made these actions possible. Drotner is moving towards such an explanation when she interprets the actions as a part of a formal category of gender relations. The actions are described as “a process of mutual articulation and negotiation of gendered otherness”. But she does not clarify whether gender relations were a more general mechanism (among other mechanisms) underlying and, in a sense, causing the negotiations. By insisting that concepts should emerge from observations and be of relevance to the lives of those who are the subject of the study, this methodology is limited in its focus (Layder 1993: ch 4). The concepts developed are not able to identify necessary and constitutive properties of the object in question.

Qualitative Media Audience Research and Its Potential

This article ends with a proposal, presenting a *Research map for qualitative media audience research on media consumption*. It is important to stress that the map is provisional and does not in any sense dictate what this research should do. It instead aims at providing ideas of the kind of constituent properties or fundamental structures of the process of media consumption that it could be fruitful to focus on. It is important to underline that the perspective proposed here is not something that completely breaks with the qualitatively oriented media audience research in the field. On the contrary, there are several studies that have been conducted in a way that is congruent with a critical realistic view. Therefore, a number of examples of qualitative studies that in one way or another have identified and won insight into fundamental structures or transfactual conditions involved in media consumption are presented.

In reading this map it is important to keep in mind that different mechanisms belong to different layers or strata of reality: “/.../ the world is not only differentiated and structured, it is also stratified. The mechanisms in their turn belong to different layers or strata of reality, and furthermore, these strata are hierarchically organized” (Danermark et al. 2002:59). A point made by Bhaskar (1978), also with reference to experimental activity, is that in science the search for explanations never ends. From explanations on one level, sciences move on to search for explanations on other levels.⁶

The point of departure for the suggestion is that the mechanisms that somehow are involved in, and reproduced by, media consumption are layered in the same way. Layder (1993: chapter 5; see figure 4) presents what he calls a *resource map for research*. The judgements about the nature of social life, which must be seen as a necessary part of the scientific work process, involve judgements on how to approach the research topic. Layder (1993:73) asserts that the map could be a resource for analyzing earlier research. It could also, which is the main purpose of the map, be useful when we define relevant research problems. In practice the researcher singles out the area (or sometimes areas) that comprises the mechanism (or mechanisms) the researcher chooses to focus on.

The map presented here is clearly influenced by Layder’s map but is adjusted to research on media consumption. It is important to keep in mind that there is no rigid dividing line between the different levels. But at the same time it is important for research to be well defined, and try to focus on mechanisms on one level.

Figure 4. *Research Map for Qualitative Media Audience Research on Media Consumption*

Research element: ...	Research focus
(1) The overreaching societal context.	Media consumption as a part of more overreaching social structures and power relations. The media as mechanisms for reproducing different social forms (class, gender, ethnic relations, etc.)
(2) Immediate context of everyday life	The immediate environment of media consumption as a social (and routinised) activity taking place in everyday life. The media as mechanisms structuring everyday (family) life.
(3) The dynamics of texts/genres	The dynamic relationship between text and reader in the process of media consumption. The texts/genres (with their different textual structures) provided by the media function to establish different ways to interpret and understand social phenomena.
(4) The dynamics of mind	The mental processes of interpretation involved in media consumption. Individuals or groups of people and their more general mental/cognitive frames involved in the interpretative process.

Note: Compare Layder 1993:72.

(1) Layder uses the term *context* when he describes this level. It is defined here as *the overreaching societal context*. This could be said to concern an ideological level of media consumption. This dimension concerns, for example, questions about how power relations such as class, gender or ethnicity could be reproduced and sustained; it concerns how different values, traditions and forms of social and economic organisation are reproduced. A good example of research that has discussed mechanisms on this level is the critical political economy (see, for example, Golding and Murdock 1996; 1997), even if this research has not (or has very seldom) conducted empirical investigations on the process of media consumption (see Hagen and Wasco 2000). A good example of a study involving this dimension is Morley's *Family Television* study (Morley 1986; see also Morley 1992). One conclusion in this book is that the differences in viewing habits between men and women are a result of "the dominant model of gender relations within society". For men, the home is foremost a site of leisure, whereas for women it is associated with a sphere of work. For men, television viewing is something that they can concentrate on, while women are often distracted because of their household responsibilities (Morley 1986:146-8). What Morley identified was an overreaching patriarchal structure operating in the situations of media consumption in the households; it was a fundamental condition or a fundamental structure that caused the differences. A point made by Morley that is important here is that the pattern found in his study would not necessarily occur in other contexts (i.e., families of a different class or ethnic background). That is to say that this mechanism could be neutralised or (in interaction with other mechanisms) partly have other consequences.

(2) What is described here as the *immediate context of everyday life* is termed *setting* by Layder. Layder (1993:89) underlines that what he terms setting and context should be "thought of as rather different but complementary aspects of social life". In his map,

this concerns the more immediate environment of social activity that has an established character, for example school, factory, hospital or family life. The concept *setting* refers to the more general activities that occur in such organisations. Parts of the ethnographic research on media consumption have focused on this level. The pioneering work performed by James Lull is a good example of research that has identified mechanisms on this level. In his ethnographic study of “audience behaviour”, Lull (1980; see also Lull 1990) investigated how the television set could structure everyday life in different families. Lull’s study showed how the use of television could be a mechanism for different activities in the household. It could, for example, be a source for conversation or a cause to avoid conversation. As a mechanism it could, in co-operation with other mechanisms, produce different forms of social interaction in the households. Lull identified a more general condition involved in and structuring everyday life.

(3) The dimension here termed *the dynamics of texts/genre* is called *situated activity* by Layder. In his map, this concerns the “dynamics of interaction itself” and “the way in which gatherings of, or encounters between, several individuals tend to produce outcomes and properties that are a result of the interchange of communication between the whole group rather than the behaviour of the constituent individuals viewed singly” (Layder 1993:80). The focus here should be on the encounter between text and readers/viewers (as part of a group of some kind). Media consumption is a form of interaction in itself. Thompson (1995) describes it as mediated-quasi-interaction. It is a form of social activity that occurs in everyday life. Texts have different meaning potentials that will be realised at the moment of interpretation. These meanings will be “caused” by the properties of the text; they depend (at least to some extent) on how the text is structured. The textual structures could be of a more general kind – with textual properties that characterise a genre – and these structures could tend to produce some interpretations but not others.⁷ The encounter between text and reader involves a range of different social mechanisms that could be involved in the moment of interpretation, and these mechanisms could reinforce or neutralise the meaning potential of the text. One interesting example of research focussing on this dimension is a reception study of news conducted by Justin Lewis. Lewis (1991:ch. 6) points to the fact that “the narrative structure” of news has an “effect” on how viewers interpret the topic in question (in this case, the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis). How the news stories are reported is of importance to how the viewers interpret and understand the topic in question. Different ways of organising the text (telling the story) have a tendency to produce different ways of relating to the subject matter. The “narrative structure” of the story could be described as a mechanism that has a tendency to produce some interpretations, and not others.

(4) In Layder’s map, the fourth dimension is called *Self* and focuses on the “Self-identity and individual’s social experiences”. In this map, the research element is what could be termed *mind*. A starting point for research on this dimension is theories developed within cognitive psychology – after what has been called “The Cognitive Revolution” (see Höijer 2000; see also Bruner 1990). Here, the task for media audience research would be to identify what could be described as more general mental/cognitive frames or schemata involved in the process of media consumption.⁸ According to Höijer (2000), this is a field of investigation that has not been particularly well theorised by qualitative media audience research, although this has started to change (see Höijer and Werner 1998). Höijer claims that it is necessary to develop theories on this level if we want to

understand, and to some extent explain, what goes on in the process of media consumption and the interpretative process people are involved in.

Final Comment

The overall argument in this article is that qualitative media audience research must “free itself” from the empiricist conceptualisation of generality as representativeness and focus on the deep structures of the objects. Qualitative media audience research should make general claims in the sense that it aims at identifying and gaining knowledge about the transfactual conditions or fundamental structures of the objects of study. At the core of the argumentation in this article is the claim that qualitatively oriented media audience research has an inherent capacity – in its potential to develop abstract concepts – to do this work.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the perspective proposed in this article is not a framework for reaching convergence between qualitative and quantitative methodologies; a cross-fertilization is not proposed. A media audience research that takes its point of departure in critical realism must be seen as a third (or perhaps fourth) methodological way for media audience research.⁹ However, from this viewpoint, no method can be excluded in advance. This does not mean that “anything goes”. Which methods and strategies the researcher chooses to use in a study must be decided in relationship to the nature of the research problem. Layder (1993) recommends a *multistrategy approach*¹⁰, an approach which “involves judgements about the nature of social life and society, and these imply certain things about the most appropriate ways of doing the research.” Methods could be combined, and as researchers we should be open to use new combinations of methods. This means that quantitative methods could also be a useful tool in the work of identifying mechanisms.

Notes

1. Previous researchers have discussed critical realism and media and communication research. For instance, in a textbook on methods for Researching Communications, Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999) adapt to critical realism, but they do, to a limited extent, discuss the methodological consequences of this perspective. In his handbook on Media and Communications Research, Jensen (2002:ch. 15) draws on thoughts developed by Bhaskar, but does to a limited extent discuss the question of generality. Pavitt (1999) discusses communication theory from a realistic perspective (what he calls ‘scientific realism’). Lau (2004) discusses critical realism in relation to studies of news production.
2. In his early work, Bhaskar characterises his position as Transcendental Realism. Today, the term *Critical Realism* is commonly used.
3. It should not be interpreted here that I am promoting different forms of experiments as a way to win new insights about media audiences.
4. Within the qualitatively oriented media audience research, Jensen (1995:chapter 9) has presented similar arguments. Jensen emphasises that empirical extrapolations stay on the same level of abstraction, while through theoretical generalisations it is possible to reach “at a higher level of abstraction”.
5. Scientific modes of inferences refer here not only to deduction and induction, but also to *abduction* and *retroduction*. For the perspective developed in this paper, the latter forms of inferences are indispensable when the researcher tries to identify the object’s fundamental structures. Here I will not go any further and describe how this analytic process proceeds. See Danermark et al. (2002:ch. 4 and 5) for an excellent description of these modes of inferences and how they could be used in scientific work.
6. Bhaskar (1978:168-9) exemplifies this with a description of the historical development of chemistry.

7. I believe this is well in line with what Hall (1980) suggested with the concept *preferred meaning/preferred reading*.
8. This dimension has been described by several other concepts used within cognitive psychology (such as models and scripts). I think that this dimension in itself contains mechanisms operating on partly different levels.
9. This means that I do not share the view presented by Jensen (2002), who presents realism as 'a likely candidate for a framework within which convergence may proceed'.
10. Danermark et al. (2002) make a similar point when they advocate "a critical methodological pluralism".

References

- Ang, I. (1991) *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge.
- Ang, I. and Hermes, J. (1996) 'Gender and/in Media Consumption', In: Curran, J. and Gurevitch (ed) *Mass Media and Society*. London: Arnold.
- Bhaskar, R. (1978) *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Bhaskar, R. (1989) *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*, London: Verso.
- Bruner (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP.
- Collier, A. (1994) *Critical Realism – An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*. London: Verso.
- Danermark, B. Ekström, M. Jakobsen, L. and Karlsson, J.C. (2002) *Explaining Society – Critical Realism in the Social Science*. London: Routledge.
- Drotner, K. (2000) 'Less is More: Media Ethnography and Its Limits', In: Hagen, I. and Wasko, J., *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research*. Cresshill: Hampton Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Aldine Publishing.
- Golding, P. and Murdock, G. (1996) 'Cultural, Communication, and Political Economy', In: Curran, J. and Gurevitch, M. (red), *Mass Media and Society*, London: Arnold.
- Golding, P. and Murdock, G. (1997) *The Political Economy of the Media* (vol. 1), Cheltenham: Elgar.
- Hagen, I. and Wasko, J. (2000) *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research*, Introduction. Cresshill: Hampton Press.
- Halkier, B. (2003) 'The Challenge of Qualitative Generalisations in Communication Research', *Nordicom Information*, 25:3.
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/decoding', In: Hobson, D., Lowe, A., Willis, P. and Hall, S. (red), *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson.
- Höijer, B. (1990) 'Studying Viewers' Reception of Television Programmes: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations', *European Journal of Communication*, vol 5.
- Höijer, B. (2000) Kulturkognitiva perspektiv – den tänkande människan, *Nordicom Information*, 22:2.
- Höijer, B. and Werner A. (ed.) (1998) *Cultural Cognition – New Perspectives in Audience Theory*, Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Jensen, K.B. (1995) *The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*. London: Sage.
- Jensen, K.B. (2002) *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*. London: Routledge.
- Lau, R. (2004) Critical Realism and News Production, *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26 (5): 693-711.
- Layder, D. (1993) *New Strategies in Social Research*. Oxford. Polity Press.
- Lewis, J. (1991) *The Ideological Octopus. An Exploration of Television and its Audience*. London: Routledge.
- Lull, J. (1980) *Mass Media and Family Communication: An Ethnography of Audience Behaviour*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. Microfilms International.
- Lull, J. (1990) *Inside Family Viewing*. London: Routledge.
- Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: BFI.
- Morley, D. (1986) *Family Television*. London: Comedia/Routledge.
- Morley, D. (1992) *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Roe, K. (1996) 'The Uses and Gratifications Approach: A Review of Some Methodological Issues', *Journal of Behaviour and Social Sciences*, 1:81-96.
- Rosengren, K-E. (1983) 'Communication Research: One Paradigm or Four', *Journal of Communication*: 33:185-207.
- Rosengren, K-E. (1993) 'From Field to Frog Ponds', *Journal of Communication*: 43:3.
- Sayer, A. (1992) *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (Second edition). London: Routledge.

- Schröder, K. (1999) 'The Best of both Worlds? Media Audience Research between Rival Paradigms', In: Alasuutari, P. (ed.), *Rethinking the Media Audience*. London: Sage.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Thompson, J.B. (1995) *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Stanford Carolina, Stanford UP.

*Göran Eriksson, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Media and Communication Studies,
Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, goran.eriksson@hum.oru.se*